THE SUCCESS OF DEFEAT

BY MALTBIE D. BABCOCK

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The Success of Defeat

Speak, History, who are life's victors? unroll thy long annals and say—
Are they those whom the world called the victors, who won the success of a day?
The martyrs, or Nero? the Spartans who fell at Thermopylæ's tryst,
Or the Persians and Xerxes? his judges, or Socrates? Pilate or Christ?

IO VICTIS: W. W. STORY

THE SUCCESS OF DEFEAT

BY

Maltbie D. Babcock, D.D.

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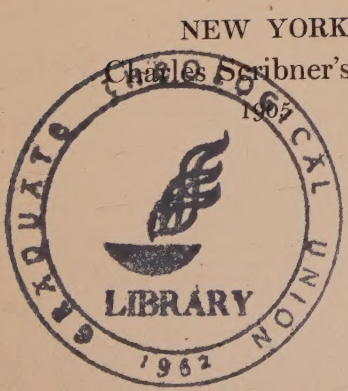

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PREFACE

THIS *Address was first given in the city of Baltimore in 1893, before the Convention of the Maryland Christian Endeavor Union—students and wage-earners, young men and young women. Its issue in printed form in the Report of that Convention, and later as a separate pamphlet, has been so eagerly sought for that for some time it has been entirely unobtainable. This new edition is therefore put forth in further response to the strong demand for it.*

Dr. Babcock's habit of rarely putting his sermons in full on paper, but almost invariably confining himself to brief, almost cryptographic notes, gives

to this the added interest of being one of the very few of his public addresses to be had in its entirety.

This sermon stands preëminent as a revelation of its author's courage and hopefulness, and of his power of communicating these qualities to others. The day following its delivery an anonymous note came to Dr. Babcock with this question,—"Could you have given that address, and meant every word of it, if you were living in a loft on seven cents a day?" Unlike the usual fate of such notes, it escaped the waste-paper basket. Every possible inquiry was made, but no trace of the writer could be found.

Six months or more afterward, in a distant city, the same sermon was given, with the story of the anonymous note

told in full. After the service a man came forward saying, "Dr. Babcock, I think I know your seven cents a day man. In fact, I know of two men struggling in your city for a medical education on just about that sum."

The search again began, and after months two men were found living in the belfry of a Church in a distant quarter of the city. Wellnigh crushed by their circumstances, cynical as to their future, they were almost in despair when they heard this sermon. Under the inspiration which that gave, and under Dr. Babcock's personal influence, their new courage and hope soon gave a further illustration from real life of the truth and power of this address.

I SING THE HYMN OF THE CONQUERED, WHO FELL IN THE BATTLE OF LIFE—
THE HYMN OF THE WOUNDED, THE BEATEN, WHO DIED OVERWHELMED IN THE STRIFE:
NOT THE JUBILANT SONG OF THE VICTORS, FOR WHOM THE RESOUNDING ACCLAIM
OF NATIONS WAS LIFTED IN CHORUS, WHOSE BROWS WORE THE CHAPLET OF FAME—
BUT THE HYMN OF THE LOW AND THE HUMBLE, THE WEARY, THE BROKEN IN HEART,
WHO STROVE AND WHO FAILED, ACTING BRAVELY A SILENT AND DESPERATE PART;
WHOSE YOUTH BORE NO FLOWER ON ITS BRANCHES, WHOSE HOPES BURNED IN ASHES AWAY:
FROM WHOSE HANDS SLIPPED THE PRIZE THEY HAD GRASPED AT: WHO STOOD AT THE DYING OF DAY
WITH THE WORK OF THEIR LIFE ALL AROUND THEM, UNPITIED, UNHEEDED, ALONE;
WITH DEATH SWOOPING DOWN O'ER THEIR FAILURE, AND ALL BUT THEIR FAITH OVERTHROWN.

IO VICTIS: W. W. STORY

The Success of Defeat

Abraham . . Isaac . . Jacob . . Moses . . Gideon . . Barak . . Samson . . the prophets; who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, . . escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens: others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings; they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were slain with the sword;—*being destitute, afflicted, tormented; of whom the world was not worthy.*

HEBREWS XI

THE SUCCESS OF DEFEAT

"WERE slain with the sword." What are these words doing here? This is the chapter of an overcoming faith. I can understand the right of the earlier record, "Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens." This is the victory of faith, this is overcoming. But what place here have the words "tortured and mocked and scourged, imprisoned, stoned, sawn asunder, slain with the

sword"? Just the place God meant them to have. Is this the roll-call of God's heroes? Yes. Who are they? Those who escaped the edge of the sword and put to flight the armies of the aliens. Hear them answer to their names—Abraham, Joshua, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah and David. But what of the dead on the field, who were slain by the sword? God answers for them. God counts them worthy of equal honor—may I not say of greater honor? for it is after their record that He adds, "of whom the world was not worthy."

To conquer with the sword is the victory of faith. Is to be slain by the sword the victory of faith? Yes, if the same fidelity fills each heart and nerves each arm. To escape the sword may mean defeat; it may be a disgrace to be alive.

To fall by the sword may be triumph; it may be glorious to be dead.

Failure, then, may not be as black a word as it looks. It is not. I believe failure can be a greater friend than foe, and prove of sweeter uses than success.

SUCCESS and failure are not like day and night, heat and cold, mutually exclusive—night the absence of day, and cold of heat. Success and failure subtly interpenetrate.

The ground beneath the cherry-trees is white with fallen petals. If every blossom set to fruit, would that mean success?

The tool of the carver is dulled and worn away. Is that failure? The chips of his work are all about him, cut away from the mother-wood: is that which falls to the earth a failure?

Is the dead soldier's a wasted life? What though his arm can strike no more — what though he is buried in a nameless grave!

Can you see the success of failure? Did the blossom fail that withered in obedience to that law that sought for quality rather than amount of fruit? Did the chisel fail that, in wearing away the wood, was itself worn away for very faithfulness? Did the fragment fail that fell, not from rottenness, but that the vision and dream of the carver might be realized, that the figure of beauty might be led forth from its long and dark imprisonment? Did the brave heart fail though the soldier fell? To gather the spear-points like a sheaf of arrows into his breast and make a way for liberty, was death, but no failure. It was supremest victory, consummate success.

But what if the cherry-blossoms bloomed in vain? What if no fruit ripened that year? What if the carving failed, and the cause was lost for which the warrior died? That is failure! No, a thousand times no! The cherry ovule that did its best to swell into fruit, the tool that was true steel, and the soul faithful unto death, succeeded. Each was true to itself, each fulfilled its mission. Then the outward may perish while the inward is renewed? Yes! The plan I conceive may fail, but I be better to do and bear. The cause I love may go down, while I, loyal to my convictions, true to my post, blazing away at my gun, am a success. *I* need be no failure.

Here we have reached the splendid truth—I need be no failure! Come what may, succeed or fail what will, I

need be no failure. My field may be stony or swampy, my plough may be poor, my strength small, the weather bad; but if heartily as unto my Lord I do the best I can and look not back but keep right on, I am no failure.

To have a fair wind and a sunny sky and a tight boat is not necessarily to be a success, and to have head-winds and cross-cut tides and rain and cold and hunger is not of necessity to be a failure; but no matter what the weather does, no matter what the tides,—rain or shine, snow or blow, to steer by the stars and with a true heart to keep the course as best I can, is to succeed and be no failure, though my boat goes down and I am no more known till the sea gives up its dead.

Failure, then, is never an absolute word—always relative; and the only

real failure is inside, not outside. It is not being true to the best we know. Inside failure is the only calamity. Outside failure may be the greatest blessing. Let me be loyal to plain and providential duty, true to the best I know, and what seems failure will prove to be a means of knowledge, development, and not seldom the bud of success.

Tracing the thought along these lines in relation to self-knowledge, strength and success, by God's help we shall get some new light on our dark clouds and go on our way with a stouter heart.

Self-Knowledge

A MAN in a wrong place—wrong not for some one else, but wrong for him—finds out the fact, in failure. He thought he had found his niche. No, the hole is a round one and the peg three-sided. Perhaps the bayonet of circumstance drove him where he is. Perhaps it was his father's fault, who trained up the child in the way his brother ought to have gone. Whatever the cause, the result is the same. A carpenter goes to do a special piece of work and finds he has taken the wrong tool. What is to be done? Get the right tool, or, if that is impossible, make the best of the one he has. You may have

discovered your mistake. You were meant for business life and are professional, or are in business life and no success, for your gifts run another way. But the choice has been made; time, money, strength invested. What is to be done? If the way is open out of the wrong to the right place, go! For every reason, go! Failure has taught you something about yourself. Acknowledge your mistake. It will only prove you a wiser man to-day than you were yesterday. Then you were wrong and did not know it; now you know it, and, more, propose to remedy it.

But what if it cannot be remedied? —for despite the proverb, it often is too late to mend. Then make the best of things and of yourself. It is never too late to do that. You have broken your sword in your ignorance and can-

not get another. Throw away the half-blade? Never! Show what you can do with half a blade. You can be a success if you do the best you can with your broken sword. Failure is not to be true to the best you know, and the best you know is to stay where you are and to do what you can as well as you can. Men may pity you and call you a failure. Never mind, that is outside. If you have learned from outside failure to be an inside success, have learned that God looks at what a man is, not merely at what he has, and have resolved to please Him with a broken sword and an all but broken spirit, you can happily await His verdict.

SAYS Joaquin Miller:

"*O great is the hero who wins a name,*
But greater many and many a time
Some pale-faced fellow who dies in shame,
And lets God finish the thought sublime."

To learn that time can finish nothing eternal, to learn that character is what God is seeking and that it grows out of struggle rather than attainment, that it is a question of faithfulness rather than success, of direction rather than distance; that to make the most of one talent, of half a talent, of a broken sword, if it is all you have, is all God asks and will win all the recognition He can give any one—is to learn a priceless lesson. If failure has taught you that it is not how many tools a man has, but how well he works with what he has, that interests God; if failure

has taught you that manhood is worth more than money, that money without manhood is contemptible, eternal bankruptcy; that the circumstances of life are only its scaffolding, within which the true temple of a Christlike character is to be built — then you should thank God with full heart for your teacher. To be a workman that needeth not to be ashamed before Him at His coming, because doing the best he can, somewhere else if he can, where he is if he must, patient and uncomplaining, finding no fault with God and trying to give God no occasion to find fault with him, growing in grace and in the knowledge of his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ — this is to succeed. There is no doubt about it!

How vigorously Browning holds and expresses the truth:

"*Not on the vulgar mass*
Called 'work,' must sentence pass,
Things done, that took the eye and had the price;
O'er which, from level stand,
The low world laid its hand,
Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice.

"*But all the world's coarse thumb*
And finger failed to plumb,
So passed in making up the main account:
All instincts immature,
All purposes unsure,
That weighed not in his work, yet swelled the man's *amount:*

"*Thoughts hardly to be packed*
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped:
All I could never be,
All men ignored in me,
This I was worth to God, *whose wheel the pitcher shaped.*"*

* "Rabbi Ben Ezra."

Thank God, then, that failure may show us our right place, but, best of all, may show us the value of that which is personal, inalienable, eternal, may open our eyes to an arena where to struggle is to succeed, where the prizes are attainments rather than acquisitions, character, not reputation—prizes whose crown is to be like Christ.

Strength

THE thought of strength growing out of failure has been already more than suggested. The result is not inevitable,—for failure may weaken us if we let it,—but a result happily possible, and always possible if we will have it so. For though in an unhappy moment the hand of the carver may slip and the fair face be hopelessly disfigured, yet by all that was hurt, by all there was to disfigure, has the workman's hand grown in skill. To have failed means to have striven, and to have striven means to have grown stronger. A boy taunted for failing in a prolonged attempt to answer a hard

question said, "Well, I would rather try and fail than do as you did, sit still and do nothing." Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings truth comes, clear as a philosopher's words and clearer. It was the boy's way of expressing what George Eliot meant when she said, "Failure after long perseverance is much grander than never to have a striving good enough to be called a failure." Why grander? Because to plan to do something worth doing in this world, to be a producer and not a mere consumer, to endeavor to accomplish something for God and man, is a grand thing of itself; to carry out the idea by thought, counsel, prayer, labor, perseverance, is grander yet. Does a happy end crown the work — clear, unqualified success? Grandest of all, we say. But what of the fatal alternative? What

if after all the plans come tears of disappointment? What if after all the pains and labor comes failure? Is all lost? By no means! The work may be a failure, but the worker stronger. The thing may not have been accomplished, but the man be a more *accomplished man:* and that is God's point.

And so it is grander to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all, by so much as any iron that has known the hot puddling and tempering, and gained qualities of steel, is better than crude, raw ore.

Ah, but if out of failure a man often comes forth stronger, how magnificently is the strength of character revealed and redoubled as a man for conscience' sake goes deliberately *into* failure, under its shadow and stigma, choosing to suffer rather than to sin, to fail in his

plan rather than to do wrong. Is it more noble to advance than to retreat? Yes, in a good cause. But if a man discovers the cause unworthy, it is nobler and takes far more moral muscle to retreat. To say "I am in for it and will go through anyhow" may have the flavor of heroism, but the fact and force of genuine heroism is not there at all. Heroism is doing what is right, no matter what it costs, no matter how much it is worth. "It is better," says Ruskin, "to prefer honorable defeat to a mean victory, to lowering the level of our aim that we may more certainly enjoy the complacency of success." This is to have the thing succeed and the man fail. God forbid! No matter what becomes of dreams, hopes, plans, pleasures, ambitions, fortune, friends—the *man* must not fail. Then all is gone.

These are the days to believe this; these are the times to show that we believe it is better to fail on right principles than to succeed on wrong ones. If we find ourselves in a tangle, caught in the meshes of selfish, materialistic modes of thinking and living, in business or social life, where we know a bad principle, a concession to evil, a wrong method generally blinked at, will succeed in getting us out quicker than anything else, then it is our business, come what may, to say, "I will suffer, but I will not sin; I may be wronged, but I will not do wrong; my hopes and plans may fail, but I will not be a failure to save them." God is alive. He is not mocked. Character is making, and character is everything, and compromise kills it. What splendid reinforcement comes to us across the ages when

we look at the three young Hebrews on the plains of Dura, already well on in royal promotion, now challenged for not bowing down before the golden image, and hear them say, as they face the fiery furnace waiting to consume them and all their hopes, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning, fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of thine hand, O King! But if not, be it known unto thee that we will not serve thy gods." "*But if not*"—there is the pivot. We will do right though we burn! Alas for the wrecks through fear, through concessions to gain some little end!—the bargains with sin to avoid suffering. Alas for the selling of manhood—the shameful bartering of principles—the implicit and explicit lies to save a darling project from the dogs! Alas for

the sight of a man playing with conscience as with loaded dice, selling his Christian inheritance for a mess of dollars! The sight of a man with a set of convictions about him, going into politics, and, to appease the wolves, throwing out these convictions, one by one, sacrificing character to reputation, and personal success to political advantage! The sight of a fine, benevolent scheme, which to succeed involves pandering to the notoriously bad; and the pandering, the truckling, is done lest the scheme should fail—distinctly unchristian devices resorted to lest the *thing* should not be a success—evil done under the auspices of good! The sight of some social plan, some fashionable alliance, some cherished hope of distinction in Mayfair—and lest it should fail, lest we should be thought

peculiar, the Puritan kisses the hand of the Cavalier, principles are sacrificed, conscience stifled, people wholly unworthy invited because they are always invited, men sought who ought to be shunned, forms of entertainment and amusement adopted we do not on the whole believe in, that put on the table before our guests which we know is dangerous to all and deadly to some —and all to succeed!

Is the end of these things success? Can anything succeed which has in it concession, compromise, reproach of conscience? Oh for the strength to fail! To fail splendidly, because honorably. To be poor, but clean; to have fortune broken, but conscience whole; to have friends, fame, plans, pleasures failing outside, but honor unstained, princi-

ples inviolate, integrity integral,—no failure inside. This is to be peculiar to some purpose, this is a distinction warmly to be coveted!

> "*For thence a paradox*
> *Which comforts while it mocks,*
> *Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail.*"

Oh for the strength of moral inflexibility, for that rock-like conviction of God and truth, and honor and self-respect, which dares failure, risks catastrophe, but keeps the faith!

For, mark it well, if not in the short run, yet always in the long run, the men that dare be true whatever the risk, who so value success with God that they will not yield one inch of honor, not one iota of truth to succeed with men, are the men whom God honors, honors with His own hand, honors with power to make mankind

move on, power to bring forth beneficent measures, to promote efficacious reforms, to utter the watchwords of new victories,—power to be the benefactors, liberators, saviors of their fellows,—power in the end to command the admiration and homage of the very ones who sneered at them, snubbed them in polite forms of persecution, or hounded them on to the death in ruder days.

Nebuchadnezzar and the men who kept his furnace hot bowed before the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. God cares for the honor of the men who care for the honor of their God.

The roots of true success are well grown in the hearts of men who dare to fail. During the State Convention in Springfield, Ohio, in 1858, Lincoln

read his speech to twelve men in the library of the State House. "Too advanced," said all but Herndon. Lincoln rose, walked to and fro, stopped, and said: "Friends, I have thought about this matter a great deal, have weighed the question well from all corners, and am thoroughly convinced the time has come when it should be uttered; and if I must go down because of this speech, then let me go down linked to truth —die in the advocacy of what is right and just." So spoke the man who felt to the full the danger to himself, but flinched not a hair's breadth from what he felt was his path of duty, who figured on character, not consequences.

Success

AND now we come in our thought to its closing, if not its highest issue—God's recognition in earthly success of unreckoning loyalty that dares to fail. How plainly He has written it in human history that failure opens the way to success. How often has honest incompleteness proved the bud of achievement, and death the gate of life.

The old Christian, Telemachus, throws himself into the bloody arena between the gladiators killing each other for the people's amusement. The vicious thrusts of the contestants meet in the old man and he falls, slain by the

sword, but a victor, for the gladiatorial shows were ended. The blood of the martyrs — was it in vain? No. The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church. Savonarola, Huss, Jerome of Prague, died without the vision, burned at the stake. Failures? No. The blaze of their burning lightened the way by which Luther and Calvin and Zwingli and Knox came out of the dark to be the leaders of the new world.

The seed falls into the ground and disintegrates in its dark grave. A failure? From the dying grain the new life springs. It fails that success may come. Dying, it abides not alone. From its ruins the germ of the future springs up, the harvest comes, the bread of life, to nourish a hungry world.

Discouraged soul, take comfort from the truth. You think your prayers have

not been heard. Your plans for God, your schemes of goodness and kindness, your longing for the conversion of your friends, your unselfish zeal, may seem in vain. Shadows are gathering about you. It looks as though all were to end in failure in the swift coming night. Pray on, work on—be faithful to the end. God's plans, like His plants, grow in the night. Sooner or later you will see that faithfulness is success. God is not in as much of a hurry as we are. Patience and fidelity, these are heroism and victory in His sight, and some day will be so in the sight of every one.

O BELOVED Christians, look up to the God who says "Well done, good and *faithful* servant!" Doubt not, faint not, "bate not one jot of heart and

hope, but still bear up and steer right onward."

Jesus failed! He came to His own and His own received Him not. He stretched out His hands all the day to a gainsaying and rebellious people. He encountered deadly indifference, fierce opposition, heartless calumny. He was betrayed and denied and deserted by His friends. He was crucified by His enemies at Jerusalem, where He had wept in vain. He died between two thieves, and was buried in a stranger's grave.

It was a supreme failure, and yet supremest victory.

"He did not fail, neither was He discouraged." Faithful unto death, He cried "It is finished!" and in the cry taught us that every life that seeks in love and loyalty to do the will of God

is a complete and perfect life, no matter how or where it ends; *that to be faithless is to fail, whatever the apparent success of earth; that to be faithful is to succeed, whatever the apparent failure of earth.* In the comfort and hope of this glorious truth let us give ourselves anew to God and to the doing and bearing of His will, quietly leaving the issues with Him, saying "My judgment is with the Lord and my work with my God."

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